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INFO ECOWAS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/16/2019
TAGS: KISL KDEM PHUM PREL PGOV OPDC UV
SUBJECT: BURKINA FASO: STRATEGY TO COUNTER THE "DEFAMATION
OF RELIGION" MOTION.

REF: SECSTATE 128320

Classified By: CDA Samuel C. Laeuchli for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Burkina Faso has regularly abstained on "Defamation
of Religion" votes. It will be a challenge to get Burkina
Faso to change its position to align more closely with ours
and will require direct interventions with President
Compaore. Burkina Faso's membership in the OIC and the fact
that it is a Muslim majority country with a largely Christian
leadership are factors that will need to be overcome. END
SUMMARY.

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Burkina Faso's Voting Record and the Way Forward
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¶2. (U) Burkina Faso abstained from voting in the November
2009 motion on Combating Defamation of Religion. The
abstention posture is one that Burkina Faso also adopted for
three other major the human rights votes concerning North
Korea, Burma and Iran.

¶3. (C) It will be a challenge to get Burkina Faso to change
its position to align more closely with ours.   In Burkina
Faso, where power is highly centralized and controlled, only
the President has the capacity to direct votes or change the
current course of action in favor of alignment with the U.S.
Nobody else will have sufficient traction to address this
issue nor will they be able influence the vote.

¶4. (C) In our opinion, a two pronged approach is the best
way to convince the leadership to contemplate changing its
"consensual position" of abstention. First, the issue should
be raised with the President. The Ambassador or Charge
could, on instructions from Washington, meet President
Compaore to broach the issue, contextualize the debate, and
explain that backing a U.S initiative at the UN Human Rights
Council would be more productive than either abstaining of
voting for the motion.

¶5. (C) The second step would consist in either setting up a
high level phone conversation between Compaore and A/S
Carson or the Secretary or in raising the issue during a
face-to- face meeting to personalize the request and further
stress the importance of the message. A personal call or
meeting would go a long way to making Compaore feel courted
and consulted and may drive home the importance of this issue
for the U.S. Appealing to Compaore's stature as regional
mediator and elder statesman, explaining that other
neighboring countries are watching, and perhaps looking to
Burkina Faso's leadership for guidance, may also be a path
worth exploring.

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The Obstacles are Formidable
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¶6. (C) Burkina Faso is a member of the OIC, the very
organization at the forefront of this debate. While not a
leader in the organization, Burkina Faso usually follows the
OIC lead on issues that have no immediate repercussions or
that are benign enough to Burkina Faso. The very fact that
Burkina Faso has abstained from votes on the defamation of
religion proposal is indicative of its desire to please the
United States, while mitigating the reaction from the OIC -
abstention is the middle ground, the "safe" choice for
Burkina Faso.

¶7. (U) Burkina Faso is also a country which prides itself on
religious tolerance. Burkina Faso is composed of 60 percent
Muslims (mostly Sunni branch and to a lesser degree Shi'a,
Tijaniyah or Salafi), 17 percent Christians (mainly Roman
Catholics) . The President is not eager to undertake actions
that might be considered hostile by Muslim voters, and
getting him to go against positions supported by the
international Muslim community will always be difficult. If,
however, we are successful in demonstrating to other Muslim
countries and leaders that our way of providing protection of
the freedom of religion has more to offer, it will be
considerably easier to bring Compaore along.
LAEUCHLI